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Campaigns Use Social Media to Lure Younger Voters  
By JENNA WORTHAM

In 2012, it is not enough for candidates to shake some hands, kiss a baby or two and run some TV ads. They also need to be posting funny little animations on the blogging site Tumblr.

If the presidential campaigns of 2008 were dipping a toe into social media like Facebook and Twitter, their 2012 versions are well into the deep end. They are taking to fields of online battle that might seem obscure to the non-Internet-obsessed — sharing song playlists on Spotify, adding frosted pumpkin bread recipes to Pinterest and posting the candidates’ moments at home with the children on Instagram.

At stake, the campaigns say they believe, are votes from citizens, particularly younger ones, who may not watch television or read the paper but spend plenty of time on the social Web. The campaigns want to inject themselves into the conversation on services like Tumblr, where political dialogue often takes the form of remixed photos and quirky videos.

To remind Tumblr users about the first presidential debate on Wednesday, Mr. Obama’s team used an obscure clip of Lindsay Lohan saying “It’s October 3” in the comedy “Mean Girls.” And on Twitter, Mitt Romney’s bodyguard posted a picture of the candidate’s family playing Jenga before the debate.

The techniques may be relatively new, but they are based on some old-fashioned political principles, according to Zachary Moffatt, the digital director for the Romney campaign.

“The more people you talk to, the more likely you are to win,” said Mr. Moffatt, who oversees about 120 staff members and volunteers. “The more people who interact with Mitt, the more likely he is to win. Social extends and amplifies that.”

But as is the way of the Web, a well-intended post or picture on social networks can quickly morph into a disaster. And the slightest gaffe on the campaign trail can become a “Groundhog Day” moment, repeated endlessly.

“Even a typo is a big deal,” Mr. Moffatt said.

In July, when Mr. Obama told a crowd of supporters “You didn’t build that” while talking about the importance of public infrastructure, the Romney campaign pounced, uploading photos of hot-dog-joint owners and others displaying signs with variations on the slogan “I built this.”

And Clint Eastwood’s mock interview with the president at the Republican convention sent the Web into a frenzy. Within minutes, images of Mr. Eastwood on stage, plastered with cutting captions, hit Tumblr, and Twitter was flooded with parodies. Mr. Obama’s team joined in, sharing on Twitter a photo of him in a chair marked “The President,” with the caption, “This seat’s taken.”

That retort is in line with the overall social media presence of the Obama campaign, which tends to be sharper and more attitude-laden than the Republican efforts, particularly on Tumblr. The morning after the debate, the Obama Tumblr followed up on Mr. Romney’s reference to cutting financing for PBS by posting something that was circulating on Twitter: a picture of Big Bird from Sesame Street with the caption “Mitt Romney’s Plan to Cut the Deficit: Fire This Guy.” (Laura Olin, who previously worked at a digital strategy agency, helps lend a savvy tone to the campaign’s Tumblr efforts.)

Both camps tend to rely heavily on photos, slogans and the like that have been generated by their supporters. The Obama team, in particular, is fond of posting GIFs, or short looping video clips, that have been made by others. These might show the president high-fiving children or hugging his wife and daughters. Other clips poke fun at rivals or give knowing nods to hip television shows like “Parks and Recreation.”

At times the campaign’s freer-wheeling tone can get it into trouble: an image it shared on Tumblr that urged followers to “vote like your lady parts depend on it” drew criticism from conservative bloggers and others who thought it was in poor taste. The campaign quickly took down the image, saying it had not been properly vetted.

Those who keep up with the Obama campaign on Tumblr seem to approve of the approach — with some posts attracting close to 70,000 “notes,” or likes and reposts from users.

“It’s about authentic, two-way communication,” said Adam Fetcher, deputy press secretary for the Obama campaign. “Social media is a natural extension of our massive grass-roots organization.”

By comparison, the Romney campaign’s presence on Tumblr is more subdued, sticking largely to posterlike photos with slogans like “No, we can’t.” Its posts rarely get more than 400 responses.

Both campaigns have teams of Internet-adept staff members who try to coordinate their strategy and message across many social sites. They declined to specify how this works, saying they did not want to tip off the competition. But both rely heavily on Facebook and Twitter to solicit donations, blast out reminders of events and share articles and videos conveying their stances.

Flickr and Instagram serve as scrapbooks from the campaign trail, showing the candidates trying the pie at small-town restaurants. On Tumblr and Pinterest, the campaigns often highlight photos and other material from supporters.

As important as the campaigns say these efforts are, the candidates themselves are not actually doing the posting. But sometimes their wives are. While Mr. Romney has a campaign-run Pinterest board, his wife, Ann, has her own, showcasing her favorite crafts projects and books. When Michelle Obama posts a message on Twitter or shares an image on the campaign’s Pinterest board, her posts bear her initials — “mo” — so they stand out among those generated by campaign staff.

Twitter and Facebook are still the biggest avenues for online canvassing, with their broad demographic reach and user numbers that have grown tenfold from four years ago. It may be hard to fathom what posting video clips or music playlists on less mainstream sites has to do with the election. Does it really matter to voters if Mr. Obama has Stevie Wonder on his list, while Mr. Romney prefers Johnny Cash?

Though the returns on such efforts are not easily quantifiable, neither party is taking any chances.

“What’s the return on putting your pants on in the morning? We don’t know,” said Jan Rezab, the chief executive of Socialbakers, a social media analytics firm. “But we just know it’s bad if you don’t do it.”

Coye Cheshire, an associate professor at the School of Information at the University of California at Berkeley, pointed to another motivation for such seemingly trivial online updates.

“It is important for people to know whether or not a huge political figure shares the same taste as me,” said Dr. Cheshire, who studies behavior and trust online. “And creating a playlist on Spotify is part of what makes them seem more human.”

Answer these questions using complete sentences (they are most opinion so you need to give the reasons you think this and why):

1. How are Presidential candidates using social media?

2. According to the article, younger voters are less likely to watch TV or read newspapers and more likely to use social media. How do you connect with the world? How do you think you will do so when you are voting-age?

3. Can you be as politically well-informed from social media as from reading newspapers or watching TV (online or otherwise)? Why or why not?

4. Have you come across political candidates’ messages on social media? Do you think they could influence your vote through such media? Could they influence your vote offline? Explain.

5. How can a political candidate convince you that he cares about you personally, and about what you have to say? How can he make tens or hundreds of millions of people feel this way? How can he learn to appeal to an average or typical person?